

Are Times Still Lush?

Nightspot Lush has seen a fair bit of action throughout the years. Popular evenings dedicated to hip-hop, electro house and hard dance have helped pull more than a few foreigners and tourists through its doors. Now, though, the majority of the crowd are Vietnamese. Words by **Will Peach**. Photos by



LUSH'S OPENING FOUR YEARS AGO marked the beginning of one of the first international, musically cutting-edge clubs in the city. Along with Q Bar, it was a late-night spot for expats to party. Flash forward four years and despite all the club's innovation and fresh sounds, the western faces of old, so large in number, seem to have tapered off.

"The number of foreign visitors has changed. But this is something happening everywhere, not just to us," says owner Thorin Cagle.

Fortunately for Lush, though, it is the local Vietnamese that are coming to the rescue, picking up where the foreigners have left off. Having accounted for less than half of the club's former clientele, according to Thorin they now represent more than 60 percent.

"The ratio has certainly changed. We now see a lot more middle-class Vietnamese coming to the club," he says.

The recent surge in locals has certainly changed the facial landscape of the bar. After 10pm large crowds of Vietnamese are seen drinking and chatting, relaxing on the large outdoor area – once the mainstay for expats.

But to the local community, it appears, Lush is only just beginning to grow in popularity. One visitor, Tran Dang Phuc, 27, goes almost every weekend.

"It's a great hangout for meeting all my friends and listening to music. It's very much part of the Vietnamese scene," he says.

His friend, Nguyen Thi Phuong, 23, agrees, but admits that drink prices can be a

little steep for Vietnamese salaries.

"It's not the cheapest place for drinks, but it's worth it in terms of setting," she says.

◦ Different Strokes

So just what is Lush doing to encourage such a spurt? According to Thorin, the reasons aren't obvious.

"Our formula hasn't changed at all, what's really changed is the foreigners," he says. "The global situation meant I lost a lot of my customers overnight and the ones that stayed are being really frugal."

Some former punters see it differently. Late last year there was an anti-Lush movement which even led to the creation of a vindictive anti-Lush Facebook group. According to the administrators of this group, certain unsavoury practices had crept in. Whatever issues were at stake, they seem to have been resolved and Vietnamese guests, for one, remain relatively undeterred.

"Lush has always been welcome to Vietnamese from the very beginning," says local customer Tran Manh Dan.

◦ A Plush History

Perhaps the rise in Vietnamese customers is solely down to consistency.

"We've always tried to be a fifty-fifty melting pot. We have a western style bar and club but we balance it with Vietnamese tastes," explains Thorin.

And unlike other places, the club has had a long time to lay its foundations exploring

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what works and what doesn't. "We went through mistake phases like playing real credible hip-hop that was lost on locals and even on most of the foreigners," he adds.

His own background in the industry has also meant that experience rather than ingenuity pays. A former digital artist working in the games industry, he launched his first bar Lost in Saigon before heading up the team at Lush.

"My business before heavily relied on tourists," he explains. "By diversifying you don't get the big swings that other places are susceptible to."

But if Lush is to be a benchmark for other struggling bars, just how the word broke among locals appears anything but clear. Even Thorin himself has a hard time explaining it: "I don't know what it is. All I can say is that I just didn't want to own a foreign bar. After all it's me that lives in Vietnam." **WV**